

Watchdog

AFTER-SALES SERVICE - HOW GOOD?

Following on from last month's very disturbing Tale Of A Pilgrim, we look again at the question of factory support and customer service for the kit car owner who has hit problems.



Above: Dissatisfied Pilgrim Sumo owner Alan Howell.

LAST MONTH WE HIGHLIGHTED the shocking story of a Pilgrim Sumo owner who received appalling treatment and a non-existent level of after-sales service from Pilgrim Cars.

Which Kit? reader Alan Howell had bought a turn-key Pilgrim Sumo Cobra replica from the Pilgrim factory for £12,800 in the expectation of enjoying some carefree and exhilarating retirement motoring. Alan imagined Pilgrim would be a reputable firm offering cars backed-up by the enthusiastic factory support you would expect with a high performance, classic style sports car. He quite naturally expected that his car's standards of construction and the condition of all mechanicals would have been fully inspected and sorted out at the factory, especially with regard to safety and reliability. He was wrong.

Alan's problems began immediately - with a minor electrical failure. The fuel pump packed up next, then the clutch master cylinder

needed replacing and then the sidescreen zip broke. According to Alan, no help whatsoever was forthcoming from the Pilgrim factory, a spokesman's response usually being: "No, it's nothing to do with us."

The final straw was when, after only about 1000 miles, the Sumo's offside front suspension completely collapsed while the car was travelling at around 40mph. The wheel parted company with the car, the chassis and engine sump ground into the tarmac and Alan was extremely lucky not to have a serious crash, suffer serious injury or worse...

Equally outrageous was Pilgrim's attitude to the whole sorry situation: the company refused to help in any way. Alan was eventually advised to take Pilgrim to court and did so last December, winning his case and gaining damages. His message was loud and clear: "I still cannot believe what shockingly bad service and support I received from the company. Nor can I believe how lucky I was not to suffer much more severely when my car's front suspension suddenly collapsed. To anyone wanting a Cobra replica, all I can say is I'm adamant that you don't go to Pilgrim. Go somewhere else."

Alan Howell's unpleasant experience and the feelings he's been left with as a result certainly aren't going to enhance Pilgrim's reputation. But what other company do you turn to for a quality Cobra at an affordable price?

Classic Replicas of Bournemouth is one possibility. This company produces the Viper, a thoroughly proven machine which has been in production for 15 years - albeit in lesser numbers than Pilgrim. Priced at an extremely attractive £2595 inc (a

special offer currently brings this down to an even better looking £2295), the body/chassis kit is offered for either Ford Sierra or Jaguar running gear and accepts 4-cylinder, V6, V8 or V12 power.

"I always take full responsibility for my products," says Classic Replicas' boss Ken Cook, "and do everything possible to help customers out. We even offer free assembly advice on the 'phone up until 10pm weekdays and between 9am and 4pm on Saturdays. My view is that it's a very personal type of business, and with customers assembling their kits mostly after hours, they're most likely to need help after hours.

"We don't sell many turn-key cars but, when we do, they usually have brand new engines and fully rebuilt suspension and come with a written guarantee on parts and labour that's valid for 12 months or 12,000 miles. If we were to sell a car using a second-hand rebuild engine, the guarantee would differ to reflect that."

Particularly well known in the Cobra replica field is DJ Sportscars International, maker of the venerable Dax Tojeiro. We spoke to DJ's boss Brian Johns and again had our confidence restored on the question of customer service.

"Whenever there's a problem," says Brian, "we look at it from the customer's point of view. We always try and help and we don't put a

time limit on the situation. If someone who bought a kit or parts 18 months ago rings up today and says something's wrong or doesn't fit, we'll change it. One chap contacted us recently to tell us that some parts he had received from us three years ago had not stood the test of time as he felt they should have. We asked him to return them to us; we agreed with him and refurbished them for him at our expense.

"The trouble is, while 99% of our customers are fine, some people do take the mickey, usually if they've made a mistake of their own doing or perhaps damaged something. An e-mail we received not long ago came from a guy who'd bought a Cobra kit about 15 years ago, kept the car in a damp garage and was complaining that his nudge bars and over-riders had gone rusty! We offered to re-chrome them at cost price whereupon he sent another e-mail which was rather abusive. That was the last we heard from him.

"We've never sold many complete cars but occasionally sell our demonstrators. We sold a Chev 427 big-block powered car in 1999 and it had been super-reliable over its eight-year life. Well, soon after the new owner had taken delivery, there were problems with the clutch starter and radiator, all of which we sorted out for him. We sold the car on a 'as seen and inspected basis' - it was eight years old, but felt it

Below: Classic Replicas' Viper has been in production for 15 years and the company has an excellent reputation for customer service.



Backchat

Letters

It's always interesting to read the thoughts and opinions of readers. Why not put pen to paper and share your views with the kit car world via *Backchat*?

PILGRIM TALE PART 2

I HAVE JUST READ THE ARTICLE IN *Which Kit?* about Alan Howell's unfortunate incidents with his Pilgrim Sumo and Mr Tanner's "I don't give a toss" attitude and I felt compelled to write to you about my experiences with the company.

About this time last year, I was looking into buying a Cobra replica and narrowed down the search to the Dax Tojeiro and Pilgrim Sumo, which the Sumo won. I ordered a build manual and, once read, I had several queries about the car. Anyway, I wrote a letter to Mr Tanner, and never got any replies. I phoned Pilgrim about the modifications to the front hubs, namely the tapered drills used, and got a "dunno mate" from some bloke in the factory. This really put me off buying a Pilgrim Cobra, so instead I bought a part-finished Marlin Roadster (Triumph Vitesse 2-litre) which I'm going to finish and the rest of the money I saved I bought myself a Jaguar XJ40. It may not be a sports car but the Marlin will make up for that!

One last thing: I have phoned and e-mailed Marlin about queries on my Roadster and they have always given me a straight answer. If they don't know, they'll give me the address of someone who does. I'm extremely impressed with Marlin's customer service for a car

that is almost 20 years old, and look forward to continually doing business with them as I love the looks of the Sportster. So who knows what the future may bring?

By the way, keep up the excellent work with the magazine.

Paul Southin
Stanford-Le-Hope
Essex

• Your letter just goes to show the vast chasm that exists within the kit industry concerning manufacturers' attitudes to customer service. Some simply don't have much of a clue and others realise that good personal service is an integral part of buying a hand-built car.

Alan Howell's shocking experience with his Pilgrim Sumo, as reported in last month's *Which Kit?*, will do our industry no good at all and will possibly drive away potential customers. After all, he's hardly going to recommend the company to his friends, is he? Marlin, on the other hand, has obviously got it right and could well gain further business simply from caring about – and helping – a customer whose car the current company didn't even make. We'd love to hear more reports about companies whose customer service is as good as Marlin's – Ed.

SHOW WINNER

MANY THANKS FOR THE CLASSIC car show competition tickets. My long standing, kit car suffering girlfriend and I are now looking forward to a weekend in the West Country and a rummage in the autojumble. Just hope I don't get tempted to dump the still-not-complete Cobra and buy a knackered classic.

I've noticed the number of nice colour pics in *Which Kit?* has slowly increased, and the reviews and company info are great. How about occasionally placing a double centre page kit car pic in the middle of the magazine – just mind where you put the staples.

You used to run a series on people building their cars. I seem to

remember a medic building a Roll Hood with lots of excuses about lack of progress, a retired lecturer who actually did complete his GT a student, Guy Fraser-Staniland, an oldish-looking kit car which I think I saw at the Exeter show, a naval officer building a Cortina based Sumo. Any news? How about a return visit to see how these cars have performed if they did get finished?

Personally, I'd like more technical type articles – like how to rebuild V8 Rover or Chevy, or how to make a good quality interior.

Anyway, thanks again for the tickets.

Kevin Wells, Ash Vale, Surrey

CVH UPDATES

REGARDING THE ARTICLE IN *Backchat* (February 2001) where Chris Meiklejohn was asking you about engines in *Engine Dilemma*. You said that the CVH was not a 'standard fitment in the Sierra. Well I'm sorry to tell you but you were wrong.

The 1.8 CVH unit was fitted to replace the 1.8 OHC in 1988 and was fitted right up till 1992 when the Sierra ceased production. The main problem (as far as I know) regards fitting into kit cars is that as the inlet manifold is quite wide it can present problems regarding engine bay space. This is particularly true if the vehicle needs to run a servo assisted brake set-up (correctly via its module) the Ford air filter box is required to be used as it contains the air temperature sensor.

Why the performance should be

classified as mundane I do not know. The OHC it replaced only produced 90bhp when the CVH had 98bhp and slightly more torque as well. Naturally the OHC Ford units will remain popular for many years to come as they are (in most cases) suited to the room allowed in most kit car engine bays.

Chris Kilford
Technical Secretary
Jago Owners' Club

• Thanks for the information, by Gary of Stuart Taylor, makers of Locoblade, has also just told us that he rates the CVH highly, having successfully raced a CVH powered Locost. One problem, he says, is not a lot of tuning gear has ever been developed for the engine. Any other else want to add more views? –

Attention - Owners of PILGRIM SUMOS with Ford Sierra based chassis

Which Kit? would like to hear from any owners of these models, whether still being assembled or completed and on the road, particularly in respect of any examples that may have suffered any problems. We're conducting a unique survey and would like to hear of your experiences both good and bad.

Please contact us in writing at Sumo Survey, *Which Kit?*, 1 Howard Road, Reigate, Surrey RH2 7JE